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Published in:
Intellectual History Review

DOI:
[10.1080/17496977.2016.1175214](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2016.1175214)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sangiaco, A. (2016). Locke and Spinoza on the epistemic and motivational weaknesses of reason: the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*. *Intellectual History Review*, 26(4), 477-495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2016.1175214>

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To cite this article: Andrea Sangiacomo (2016) Locke and Spinoza on the epistemic and motivational weaknesses of reason: the Reasonableness of Christianity and the Theological-Political Treatise, Intellectual History Review, 26:4, 477-495, DOI: [10.1080/17496977.2016.1175214](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2016.1175214)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2016.1175214>



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Locke and Spinoza on the epistemic and motivational weaknesses of reason: the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*

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I cannot but approve your purpose in signifying your willingness to elucidate and moderate those passages in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* which have proved a stumbling block to readers. (Oldenburg to Spinoza, 15 November 1675)

1. Spinoza and Locke against dogmatism and deism

One of the main polemical targets of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (published in 1670) is "dogmatism". According to Spinoza, dogmatism contends that "Scripture should be subject to reason".¹ When a dogmatist interprets Holy Scripture, "if its literal sense is found to conflict with reason, no matter how evident that may seem to be in itself, he insists it should then be construed differently".² Dogmatism presupposes that natural reason is the ultimate authority in the domain of moral truths and the doctrines of Holy Scripture itself are receivable only insofar as they agree with natural reason. Spinoza strongly opposes dogmatism. He does not deny that the general moral doctrines of Holy Scripture can be proved to be consistent with the teachings of natural reason. However, in the *Tractatus* Spinoza extensively argues that reason alone is mostly unable to allow common people to discover moral truth and even less able to motivate them to act accordingly. As a result, the *Tractatus* defends the *necessity* to rely on Holy Scripture and positive religion to establish and consolidate moral practice in actual human communities.

By the end of the seventeenth century, a variety of different thinkers in England agreed on the fact that positive religions may help transmit moral truths in certain contingent historical and socio-political circumstances. Yet, they contended that unassisted natural reason could provide (and in a more effective and universal way) the same content. This view downplays the role of positive religions in guiding moral behaviours since natural reason alone could equally (if not better) succeed in grounding an acceptable moral and political life. Despite their different approaches, philosophers committed to this line of thought were usually labelled "deists". John Locke was sometimes associated with deism, especially because of the use that several deists such as Toland and Collins made of the views articulated in Locke's *Essay*.³ Yet, Locke devotes the *Reasonableness of Christianity* (published in 1695) to fight deism.⁴ In this later work, Locke argues that unassisted natural reason would be unable not only to motivate but also to access the fundamental moral truths necessary to ground moral and political life.

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In this paper, I argue that Locke's strategy to attack deism closely followed the strategy that Spinoza had already employed against dogmatism in the *Tractatus*. Although Spinoza has been commonly associated with English deism and often portrayed as one of its main sources,⁵ and Locke himself was sometimes charged with deism, a close comparison between Spinoza and Locke's arguments supports three important points.

First, by analysing how both Locke and Spinoza engaged in uncovering the epistemological and motivational weaknesses of reason, my reading contributes to current efforts to re-think the standard narrative of Enlightenment as a long paean to the power of reason over the passions. Recent Spinoza scholarship has already begun to appreciate how Spinoza did not conceive of reason as sufficient by itself to rule human beings and restrain passions.⁶ The fact that Locke's arguments in the *Reasonableness* parallel Spinoza's reveals that also in the seventeenth century, the weaknesses of reason, rather than its "infallible power",⁷ were the objects of intense discussion. A closer examination of Locke and Spinoza's arguments problematizes not only Spinoza's own commitment to the most "radical" and rationalist instances of the Enlightenment,⁸ but also whether leading figures such as Spinoza and Locke actually fit within this standard narrative. If radical Enlightenment is characterized by a more or less explicit iconoclastic attitude towards positive religions, Spinoza's *Tractatus* and Locke's *Reasonableness* argue on the contrary that positive religions are necessary to establish, consolidate and maintain moral practices in actual human societies.

Second, *pace* the widespread association of Spinoza with English deism, Locke's *Reasonableness* proves that Spinoza's arguments in the *Tractatus* can be powerful weapons to fight deism itself. In fact, the deist position opposed by Locke can be regarded as a development of the dogmatist position already attacked by Spinoza. Both Spinoza's *Tractatus* and Locke's *Reasonableness* underscore the weaknesses of natural reason by arguing that reason is often unable to discover moral truth, and surely unable to fully motivate common people to act according to those truths. Nonetheless, this comparison also reveals that the main difference between the two authors concerns their accounts of the role of Christ. Yet, I shall argue that Locke's disagreement with Spinoza on this point strengthens the main argument about the weaknesses of reason that they share.

Third, the similarities between Locke and Spinoza's views suggest that Spinoza's *Tractatus* could have been a likely source for Locke's *Reasonableness*. The scholarship on Locke's direct relationship with Spinoza is surprisingly scarce.⁹ This is not due to the fact that Locke was unaware of Spinoza's position. It is true that Locke once claimed that he is "not so well read in *Hobbes* or *Spinoza*, as to be able to say what were their Opinions", yet we should not forget that Locke wrote this line in the context of a controversy with the Bishop of Worcester in order to dismiss any possible association with Spinoza.¹⁰ Actually, Locke owned all of Spinoza's available works (*Principle of Cartesian Philosophy*, *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Opera Posthuma*), and he even quoted Spinoza's *Tractatus* at least once, in his notes on James Bible.¹¹ This provides evidence that it is probable that Locke was directly acquainted with Spinoza's works and ideas. My analysis of Locke's argument in the *Reasonableness* suggests that in developing his analysis of the New Testament and his interpretation of the role of positive religion for moral practice, Locke could have found in Spinoza's *Tractatus* important support for his own thesis.

Before delving into the details of my discussion, I shall make two disclaimers concerning my approach to Locke and Spinoza's works and thought. First, I consider Locke's *Reasonableness* and Spinoza's *Tractatus* as standalone works that deserve to be discussed in their own right. Locke's *Essay* and Spinoza's *Ethics* are usually considered the most representative works of their respective authors. Yet, in the *Reasonableness* Locke seems quite far from the optimism of the *Essay*, which is embedded in his famous statement according to which "Morality is

capable of Demonstration, as well as Mathematicks.”¹² As I shall argue, in the *Reasonableness* Locke stresses that even if this demonstration would be possible, it would have arguably little impact on moral behaviours. In fact, it has even been suggested that there might be a significant evolution in Locke’s moral thought between the *Essay* and the *Reasonableness*.¹³ Although the issue of the evolution of Locke’s thought falls largely beyond the limits of this paper, I contend that an examination of Locke’s *Reasonableness* considered in itself is preliminarily required for any further assessment of the relationship between the *Reasonableness* and *Essay*.¹⁴

This consideration is even more appropriate in the case of Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, which was initiated in 1665 and published in 1670. This means that Spinoza began to work on the *Tractatus* when he had achieved only on a first draft of the *Ethics* (seemingly very different from its last version), and he concluded the *Tractatus* five years before the final version of the *Ethics* was completed in 1675.¹⁵ Moreover, in the *Tractatus* Spinoza presents almost none of his most controversial metaphysical claims (such as substance monism and his denial of freedom of will) that made the *Ethics* so indigestible for his contemporaries. Even if Locke had access to both works, any strong disagreement on the metaphysical tenets on which the *Ethics* is based would not have prevented a close reading and reworking of the *Tractatus*, in which these tenets do not play any essential role. As a result, considering Locke’s position from the point of view of the *Tractatus* allows to put in parenthesis the most controversial points of disagreement concerning metaphysical matters between the two authors.

My second disclaimer is that my comparison does not aim to delve into the metaphysical and anthropological views behind the positions defended by Locke and Spinoza in the *Reasonableness* and in the *Tractatus*. This is because neither in Spinoza’s *Tractatus* nor in Locke’s *Reasonableness* is there any trace of detailed discussions about the nature of reason and passions. Instead, both authors rely on a common understanding of these notions shared with their intended audiences, and they consider such a common understanding sufficient to deal with the matters they discuss. According to this common understanding, reason is the human capability to grasp a kind of universally accessible knowledge that entails a form of certitude that makes it immutable. On the contrary, imagination and passions are commonly understood as related to the body and rooted in sensation. As such, imagination and passions are generally more tied to individual idiosyncrasies and specific circumstances, and usually more vividly perceived than rational ideas. A full-blown explanation of *why* reason and passions work precisely as Spinoza and Locke depict would surely require a deeper philosophical analysis (which may underlie the divergences between their respective views on the subject). Yet, neither Spinoza nor Locke envisages that such an analysis would be necessary to advance the views that they defend in the *Tractatus* and *Reasonableness*.

In Section 2, I present Locke’s own argument concerning the weaknesses of reason in the *Reasonableness* by dealing first with the epistemic and then with the motivational side of this issue. In Section 3, I present Spinoza’s argument as it appears in the *Tractatus* by following the same order and providing evidence that, in fact, Spinoza aimed at establishing the same point made by Locke by using a very similar argumentative strategy. In Section 4, I discuss how Spinoza’s account of Christ constitutes the only significant difference with regard to Locke’s position. While Spinoza presents Christ as a “preacher of natural law”, Locke portrays him as a King and a Prophet. Nonetheless, I argue that in this way Locke is in a better position than Spinoza to secure the general claim concerning the weaknesses of reason to which they both subscribe.

2. Locke on the weaknesses of reason

Locke’s *Reasonableness* is intended to answer a precise query concerning how to interpret the role of Christ.¹⁶ Locke’s main target is the position defended by those who “thought there was

no Redemption necessary, [...] and so made Jesus Christ nothing but the Restorer and Preacher of pure Natural Religion”.¹⁷ Locke’s strategy against them consists in arguing that the faith in Christ is necessary to obtain Redemption because natural reason alone cannot provide it. The largest part of Locke’s *Reasonableness* (Chapters 3–11) is thus devoted to establish the exact content of the faith required for salvation, while Chapter 14 presents the argument to dismiss the possibility that natural reason alone might be sufficient to grasp natural law and oblige human beings to respect it as a law. I will deal with these two aspects of Locke’s argument in turn.

In Chapter 3, Locke draws a distinction between the “law of works” and the “law of faith”. The law of works is “that Law, which requires perfect Obedience, without any remission or abatement; So that by that Law a man cannot be Just, or justified without an exact performance of every title”.¹⁸ This law is composed of two parts, namely, the positive law of Moses (which includes ceremonies and other positive laws adapted to the ancient Hebrew State), and the law of nature.¹⁹ Indeed, “under the Law of Works is comprehended also the Law of Nature, knowable by Reason, as well as the Law given by *Moses*”.²⁰ The law of works provides a strict standard of rightness and salvation, which can follow only from a strict observance and obedience of such a law.

Nonetheless, through the law of faith we are “allowed to supply the defect of full Obedience; and so the Believers are admitted to Life and Immortality as if they were Righteous”.²¹ When perfect obedience to the law of work is not achieved, faith counts instead of it.²² The immediate problem raised by the introduction of law of faith consists in determining the exact content of this faith. Because in the New Testament God might require some additional article of faith that was not already established in the Ancient Testament, Locke claims that

we must therefore examine and see what God requires us to believe now under the Revelation of the Gospel: For the belief of one invisible, Eternal, Omnipotent God, maker of Heaven and Earth, *etc.* was required before, as well as now.²³

In the subsequent chapters, Locke establishes with a detailed examination of the New Testament that the new article of faith is the belief that “Jesus is the Messiah.”²⁴ Believing that “Jesus is the Messiah” is not an alternative to the practice of the law of works. Rather the law of faith is intended to support in a better way the practice prescribed by the law of works, especially for human beings intrinsically weak and inconstant.

In Chapter 14, Locke claims that the law of nature (entailed in the law of works) cannot be grasped or enforced by unassisted reason (i.e., without the help of Christ). As he claims: “too hard a task for unassisted Reason to establish Morality, in all its parts, upon its true foundations; with a clear and convincing light”.²⁵ To support this point, Locke underscores the weaknesses of reason in both providing access to the content of the law of nature and motivating human beings to act in accordance with it. The faith in Christ turns out to be necessary in order to obtain salvation since human beings are unable to achieve salvation if judged on the basis of the law of works only. Locke’s argument is articulated into two points, one epistemological (i.e., grasping the content of law of nature) and the other motivational (i.e., oblige human beings to respect such a law). I will deal with each of them in turn.

Concerning the epistemological point, Locke explains that:

Though the Works of Nature, in every part of them, sufficiently Evidence a Deity; Yet the World made so little use of their Reason, that they saw him not; Where even by the impressions of himself he was easie to be found. *Sense and Lust blinded their minds in some; And a careless Inadvertency in others; And fearful Apprehensions in most* (who either believed there were, or could not but suspect there might be, Superior unknown Beings) gave them up into the hands of their Priests, to fill their Heads with false Notions of the Deity, and their Worship with foolish Rites, as they pleased [...].

Nor could any help be had or hoped for from *Reason*; which could not be heard, and was judged to have nothing to do in the case.²⁶

Locke does not argue that reason is ineffective because it is somehow corrupted.²⁷ Actually, Locke wants to warrant that reason could have access to natural law at least *de jure* (i.e., it would have been possible in principle), since “God had, by the Light of Reason, revealed to all Mankind, who would make use of that Light, that he was Good and Merciful.”²⁸ Yet, Locke insists on the *de facto* (i.e., looking at how things actually turned out in human history) inability of reason to provide access to the content of the law of nature. The power of the passions (“Sense and Lust blinded their minds in some; And a careless Inadvertency in others; And fearful Apprehensions in most”) explains why human beings usually turn away from it, and priests are successful in establishing their irrational superstitions. Moreover, the great majority of mankind is unprepared to undertake the long and difficult process of deduction that reason requires in order to establish any conclusion on rational and self-evident premises.²⁹ Human trust in the innate capacity of our understanding to bring about knowledge without any external help is nothing but the result of an illusion:

Nothing seems hard to our Understandings, that is once known; And because what we see we see with our own Eyes, we are apt to over-look or forget the help we had from others, who shewed it us, and first made us see it.³⁰

To these epistemic limitations, Locke adds a further concern that has more specifically to do with the capacity for unassisted reason to motivate to act in accordance with the natural law. The first step of Locke’s argument consists in addressing the traditional intellectualist view according to which knowledge of the good would be sufficient to motivate someone to act in accordance with it, and thus sinful actions result from ignorance. Locke does not dismiss the intellectualist premise as such, but argues that, as a matter of fact, nobody before Christ had a sufficiently complete knowledge of moral law, provided by a complete system of morality, and deduced from self-evident premises on the basis of reason alone. As Locke notices:

Experience shews that the knowledge of Morality by meer natural light, (how agreeable soever it be to it) makes but slow progress, and little advance in the World. And the reason of it is not hard to be found in Men’s Necessities, Passions, Vices, and mistaken Interests; which turn their thoughts another way.³¹

On the one hand, this claim provides further support for the acknowledgement of the epistemic weakness of unassisted reason. On the other hand, it derives from this epistemic weakness a motivational weakness, since (Locke’s argument goes) imperfect knowledge cannot have full motivational force.

Against Locke’s claim that unassisted reason is unable to provide a complete system of morality, one might object that moral philosophers since antiquity did in fact provide several useful accounts of moral laws on the basis of reason alone. However, Locke responds to this objection that (as a matter of fact) nobody before Christ was able to deduce a *complete* system of morality, and this failure compromises the “authority” that philosophers and wise men of antiquity could claim to present their own prescriptions as proper *laws*:

[T]hese incoherent apophthegms of Philosophers, and wise Men; however excellent in themselves, and well intended by them; could never make a Morality, whereof the World could be convinced, could never rise up to the force of a Law that Mankind could with certainty depend on. Whatsoever should thus be universally useful, as a standard to which Men should conform their Manners, must

have its Authority either from Reason or Revelation. [...] He that any one will pretend to set up in this kind, and have his Rules pass for authentique directions; must shew, that either he builds his Doctrine upon Principles of Reason, self-evident in themselves; and deduces all the parts of it from thence, by clear and evident demonstration: Or must shew his Commission from Heaven.³²

Locke's point seems to be that we must avoid a kind of rationalistic enthusiasm that would drive us to take as a dictate of universal reason what is nothing but the result of personal speculations of specific philosophers and wise men. Although they can grasp some part of the law of nature, we have no reason to take their overall views as an actual presentation of the whole law of nature. According to Locke, history testifies that unassisted reason provided only scattered insights into the law of nature. Because this knowledge remained always incomplete, it never acquired full motivational force, and it never had sufficient authority to establish philosophical maxims as a proper universal moral code.³³

Moreover, even assuming that philosophy could have produced such a perfect system of morality deduced by reason alone, Locke contends that this would have still been ineffective since the great majority of human beings would be unable to truly grasp the content of the law conveyed and demonstrated through merely rational arguments:

Philosophy seemed to have spent its strength, and done its utmost; Or if it should have gone farther, as we see it did not, and from undeniable Principles given us *Ethicks* in a Science like Mathematicks in every part demonstrable, this yet would not have been so effectual to man in this imperfect state, nor proper for the Cure. The greatest part of mankind want leisure or capacity for Demonstration; nor can they carry a train of Proofs; which in that way they must always depend upon for Conviction, and cannot be required to assent to till they see the Demonstration. Wherever they stick, the Teachers are always put upon Proof, and must clear the Doubt by a Thread of coherent deductions from the first Principle, how long, or how intricate soever that be. And you may as soon hope to have all the Day-Labourers and Tradesmen, the Spinsters and Dairy Maids perfect Mathematicians, as to have them perfect in *Ethicks* this way. Hearing plain Commands, is the sure and only course to bring them to Obedience and Practice. The greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe.³⁴

The epistemic weakness of reason also reinforces Locke's claim concerning the motivational weakness of reason. In fact, people who are unable to fully grasp rational demonstrations will also lack the motivation to act on the basis of them.

If the law of nature cannot be enforced by unassisted reason alone, it has to be sanctioned by a different kind of authority, which is not provided by reason itself but by religious revelation. This was Christ's role indeed:

Such a *Law of Morality*, Jesus Christ hath given us in the New Testament; But by the latter of these ways, by Revelation. We have from him a full and sufficient Rule for our direction; And conformable to that of Reason. But the truth and obligation of its Precepts have their force, and are put past doubt to us, by the evidence of his Mission [...]. Here *Morality* has a sure Standard, that Revelation vouches, and Reason cannot gainsay, nor question; but both together witness to come from God the great Law-maker.³⁵

Christ's revelation is necessary for our salvation because unassisted reason is unable to both provide access to the law of nature and oblige human beings to respect it. This is why Locke argues that the way in which Christ taught his "Law of Morality" has little to do pure rational argumentation. As already explained, "the greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe".³⁶ Yet, teaching moral duties by appealing to reason alone "would be thought proper only for a few, who had much Leisure, improved Understandings, and were used to abstract Reasonings".³⁷ As a consequence, although the content of the law taught and spread by Christ is fully

consistent with reason's dictates, he taught it by using a completely different method, which was based on experience, examples and miracles. According to Locke,

To one who is once perswaded that Jesus Christ was sent by God to be a King, and a Saviour of those who do believe in him; All his Commands become Principles: There needs no other Proof for the truth of what he says, but that he said it.³⁸

This is how the law of faith operates, namely, by granting salvation on the basis of the simple faith in Christ's authority, independent of whether one is able to grasp the ultimate rational foundation of the norms that Christ prescribes.

It is important to note that in the *Reasonableness* Locke does not rule out the possibility that, in principle, a purely rational grasp of the natural law might provide a sufficient motivational force to oblige human beings. Arguably, a perfectly rational and wise human being would be bound to the law of nature only by her rational understanding of it. However, Locke raises serious doubts about the fact that such a clear grasp of the natural law ever occurred in human history. As a result, the possibility of a purely rational ground of obligation remains a merely abstract possibility. By the end of Chapter 14, Locke reinforces this point by arguing that Christ's revelation has specific advantages over the effort of unassisted reason because it does not try to motivate human beings by appealing to their rationality, but rather by exploiting their hedonist nature.³⁹ Locke observes that:

Virtue and Prosperity, do not often accompany one another; And therefore Virtue seldom had many Followers. And 'tis no wonder She prevailed not much in a State, where the Inconveniencies that attended her were visible, and at hand; And the Rewards doubtful, and at a distance. Mankind, who are and must be allowed to pursue their Happiness; Nay, cannot be hindred; Could not but think themselves excused from a strict observation of Rules, which appeared so little to consist with their chief End, Happiness; Whilst they kept them from the enjoyments of the Life; And they had little evidence and security of another.⁴⁰

Things dramatically changed with Christ because he established the belief in the existence of an afterlife, in which human beings will be eternally rewarded or punished for their obedience to the law:

How hath this one truth changed the Nature of things in the World, and given the advantage to Piety over all that could tempt or deter Men from it? The Philosophers indeed shewed the beauty of Virtue: They set her off so as drew Mens Eyes and approbation to her: But leaving her unendowed, very few were willing to espouse her. The generality could not refuse her their esteem and commendation; But still turned their Backs on her and forsook her, as a match not for their turn. But now there being put into the Scales, on her side, *An exceeding and immortal weight of Glory*; Interest is come about to her; And Virtue now is visibly the most enriching purchase, and by much the best bargain.⁴¹

According to Locke, "Upon this foundation, and upon this only, Morality stands firm, and may defy all competition."⁴² Appealing to the self-rewarding practice of virtue might have some impact on perfectly rational creatures or scattered wise men, but it can scarcely have any influence on the majority of human beings, who are mainly driven by passions and always seeking their own happiness. By convincingly defending the belief in an afterlife in which virtue will be rewarded and vice will be punished, Christ adds a strong hedonist motivational component to his commands that will definitely move human beings to act in accordance with them. In fact, for the majority of mankind, this powerful hedonist motivational element is much more eloquent than any other rational argument.

To summarize, the reasonableness of Christ's message can be proved a posteriori through adequate reflection on the content of the law enforced by Christ, and this proof would offer further support to the fact that we *ought* to believe and obey Christ.⁴³ Nonetheless, unassisted reason is not able to provide us with a complete and adequate access to the content of the law of nature in the first place. As a consequence, unassisted reason does not have sufficient authority to really motivate human beings to act in accordance with it. In the next section, I shall prove that Locke's way of stressing the weaknesses of reason in moral practice is analogous to that already developed by Spinoza in his *Tractatus*.

3. Spinoza on the weaknesses of reason

In the *Tractatus*, Spinoza argues for two important limitations of human rationality. From an epistemological point of view, Spinoza admits that (in principle, i.e., *de jure*) reason could give to human beings direct access to moral law, but he also argues that (looking at what actually happened in history, i.e., *de facto*) the majority of human beings can hardly get acquainted with this moral law through the use of reason alone. From a motivational point of view, although Spinoza does not deny that a perfectly rational human being could be bound by reason alone to act rightfully, he argues that given that human beings are mostly driven by their passions, only an adequate manipulation of human passions can have enough motivational force to persuade a group of people to respect certain laws. I shall discuss these two points in turn.

Spinoza develops the epistemological point by advancing two claims: first, Holy Scripture contains a "natural divine law" accessible (*de jure*) through reason alone; second, the majority of mankind is mostly unable to get acquainted with this natural divine law and, for this reason, "prophetic divine law" is necessary. Concerning natural divine law, Spinoza identifies it with the knowledge and love of God:

This then is what our highest good and happiness is, the knowledge and love of God. Therefore the means required by this end of all human actions, which is God himself so far as his idea is in us, may be called the commands of God, because they are prescribed to us, as it were, by God himself so far as he exists in our minds, and therefore the rule of life [*ratio vivendi*] which looks to this end is best called the divine law.⁴⁴

This "natural" divine law is universal, does not require beliefs in narratives or ceremonies, and is rewarding in itself.⁴⁵ Natural divine law does not require considering God as a legislator since it simply prescribes the knowledge and love of God as our supreme good and happiness.⁴⁶ According to Spinoza, there are traces of this natural divine law in Holy Scripture itself, especially in Salomon's *Proverbs*.⁴⁷ This means that natural divine law can be grasped by human reason, and it is part of religious revelation. However, Spinoza's overall view is that grasping natural divine law through reason alone is extremely difficult for the great majority of human beings:

the carnal man [*homo carnalis*] however cannot understand this; it seems foolish to him because he has too meagre a knowledge of God, and he finds nothing in this highest good that he can touch or eat or that makes any impression on the flesh in which he takes so much pleasure, for knowledge of God consists in philosophical reasoning alone and pure thought.⁴⁸

Luckily, Holy Scripture contains not only natural divine law, but also *prophetic* divine law that speaks more clearly to the "carnal man". Prophetic divine law is different from natural divine law because it does not rely on an intellectual knowledge of God (neither on the part of prophets nor on the part of their audience), and it is rather adapted to prejudices and characters of different times, places and socio-political conditions. Nonetheless, prophetic divine law is

consistent with natural divine law. Prophetic divine law is concerned mainly to inculcate obedience towards the prophetic revealed law, but the *content* of this law has nothing mysterious since “the entire Law consists in just one thing, namely love of one’s neighbour. No one can deny that the person who loves his neighbour as himself by God’s command, is truly obedient and blessed according to the Law”.⁴⁹ It could be hardly argued that the love of one’s neighbour is not consistent with natural divine law grasped through reason alone.⁵⁰ From this point of view, Holy Scripture really contains true moral teachings (*vera documenta moralia*)⁵¹ that are universal in scope and perfectly reasonable in their goals while narratives, ceremonies and all the other accessory parts of Holy Scripture are intended only to adapt and inculcate obedience to the divine law in different groups of people.⁵²

Locke identified the law taught in the Ancient Testament with the law of works, which includes the positive prophetic law and the law of nature.⁵³ Spinoza similarly claims that the Ancient Testament contains both natural divine law and the prophetic divine law. Both Locke and Spinoza grant that, in principle, natural divine law is accessible to reason alone. Yet, they both stress that, as a matter of fact, the great majority of mankind did not grasp it in this way. As a result, both stress that moral law is more effectively enforced through an accurate manipulation of imagination and passions (e.g., fear, hope, devotion and wonder).⁵⁴

Locke claims that the epistemic weakness of reason and the inability of the great majority of mankind to master rational argumentation make the appeal to Revelation necessary to provide access to the content of natural law.⁵⁵ In an analogous vein, Spinoza contends that:

[A] long chain of linked inferences is required, to come to firm conclusions from basic ideas alone. Furthermore, this requires great caution and perspicacity and supreme mental discipline, qualities only seldom met with among human beings. People prefer to be taught by experience than to deduce all their ideas from a few premises and connect these together. Consequently, where someone seeks to teach a whole nation, not to speak of the entire human race, and wants to be understood by everybody, he must substantiate his points by experience alone and thoroughly adapt his arguments and the definitions of his teaching to the capacity of the common people (the majority of mankind), and not make a chain of inferences or advance definitions linking his arguments together.⁵⁶

Like Locke, Spinoza also does not claim that human beings are deprived of reason or that reason, being somehow corrupted, cannot attain the knowledge of truth and moral law. Rather, he claims that because “the mind is very often so preoccupied with greed, glory, jealousy, anger, etc., that there is no room for reason”, true virtue is better taught through experience. Biblical prophets, although scarcely equipped with rational skills and truly ignorant in many speculative matters,⁵⁷ “had a unique and extraordinary virtue, and cultivated piety with a unique constancy of purpose”.⁵⁸ Prophets enforce a practice ultimately compatible with the main prescriptions of reason and natural divine law, although they base it on a completely different ground, that is, an appropriate manipulation of imagination and passions. In this way, they provide a paradigmatic example of how the practice of virtue can be supported without relying on reason alone.

Given Spinoza’s portrait of the “carnal man” and his inability to naturally grasp natural divine law, Holy Scripture is *necessary* to attain salvation, at least for the great majority of mankind:

I must emphasize very strongly here, although I have mentioned it before, the usefulness and necessity of Holy Scripture or revelation, which I hold to be very great. For given that we cannot discern by the natural light alone that simple obedience is the path to salvation, and revelation alone teaches us that it comes from a singular grace of God which we cannot acquire by reason, it follows that Scripture has brought great consolation to mortal men. *Everyone without exception can obey, not merely the very few – very few, that is, in comparison with the whole human race – who acquire the habit of virtue*

by the guidance of reason alone. Hence, if we did not possess this testimony of Scripture, we would have to consider the salvation of almost all men to be in doubt.⁵⁹

As Locke claims that “the greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe”,⁶⁰ Spinoza also stresses that “[e]veryone without exception can obey, not merely the very few [...] who acquire the habit of virtue by the guidance of reason alone”.⁶¹ Given the epistemic weakness of reason alone, prophetic divine law is necessary to let people *know* what is the right moral and political rule of life they should adopt.

Prophetic divine law is crucially important also to successfully motivate human beings and create a sufficient obligation towards moral law. Spinoza is fully aware that “if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason points them to, society would surely need no laws”.⁶² In general, Spinoza does not deny that reason alone might have enough motivational force to bind a wise man to act in accordance with natural divine law.⁶³ However, he also recognizes this possibility as an exception rather than as a rule:

it is far from being the case that everyone can easily be led by the sole guidance of reason. For everyone is guided by their own pleasure, and the mind is very often so preoccupied with greed, glory, jealousy, anger, etc., that there is no room for reason.⁶⁴

Fostering obedience is the main business of Holy Scripture, but for the great majority of people reason does not have enough motivational force to establish obedience, which thus follows only from an appropriate use of imagination and passions. Prophetic divine law is a convenient pedagogical instrument useful not only for teaching the first rudiments of morality to common people, but also to motivate them to act accordingly.⁶⁵

Spinoza adamantly denies that reason alone could have any weight in obliging the majority of mankind. In the state of nature “each person’s natural right therefore is determined not by sound reason but by desire and power”.⁶⁶ This implies that the instauration of the civil State presupposes a “person possessing the sovereign power to compel all men by force and restrain them by fear of the supreme penalty which all men universally fear, has sovereign right over all men”.⁶⁷ Spinoza also explains that “laws should be so drawn up that people are restrained less by fear than hope of something good which they very much desire; for in this way everybody will do his duty willingly [*cupide suum officium faciet*]”.⁶⁸ Indeed, Moses “took great care to ensure that the people would do its duty willingly and not through fear”.⁶⁹ From this picture it emerges that Spinoza endorses, as Locke, a hedonist account of moral motivation, and considers unrealistic that reason alone can create sufficient obligation to moral law.⁷⁰

To summarize, the similarities between Locke and Spinoza’s views that have emerged so far are the following. Both Spinoza and Locke do not accept the theological claim that reason would have been corrupted by Adam’s fall, and they both claim that natural light is *de jure* present and uncorrupted in human beings. However, they both deny that *de facto* reason alone is sufficient to let the majority of human beings know the content of the law of nature. Moreover, they both contend that even admitting a rational knowledge of our duty, reason alone is often unable to produce obligation since it does not have sufficient motivational force to overcome the force of appetites and passions by which human beings are usually driven. Thus, they both consider Holy Scripture a necessary means to oblige (common people at least) to respect natural law on the basis of hedonist motivations.

Nonetheless, there is also a major difference between Spinoza and Locke’s views that concerns the role of Christ. This difference seems not only to widen the gulf between the two authors but also to undermine Spinoza’s own argument concerning the weaknesses of reason.

4. Christ between Spinoza and Locke

Locke identifies the *law of faith* with the belief in the fact that “Jesus is the Messiah.” This belief is not intended to increase our theoretical knowledge, but rather as a remedy to our ignorance and imperfect obedience. Believing in Christ is a *practical* attitude that will allow the believers to act in accordance with the law prescribed by Christ himself (whose content is consistent with the law of works, and thus, with the law of nature). Spinoza defends a similar view insofar as he also claims that faith is primarily a practical attitude since it consists in holding those beliefs that are necessary to support and enforce certain behaviours consistent with the prophetic divine law.⁷¹ According to Spinoza, there are seven “pious” dogmas absolutely necessary to the practice of obedience, namely, that God exists, that he is one, everywhere present, supremely powerful, prescribing love and justice, able to save those who will follow his law and merciful with those who repentant their sins. Although Spinoza does not include the belief that “Christ is the Messiah” among these seven dogmas, he does include in the seventh that “who firmly believes that God forgives men’s sins with the mercy and grace with which he directs all things and is more fully inspired with the love of God for this reason, truly knows Christ according to the spirit”.⁷²

Nonetheless, Spinoza seems to portray Christ as an exceptional figure. This exceptionality does not depend on any novelties introduced by Christ’s doctrines, but only on the way in which he presented the already known law. Spinoza does not present Christ as bringing a new “law of faith”, and rather he tends to see the *contents* of Christ’s preaching in complete continuity with the content of prophetic divine law (i.e., what Locke calls law of works). Spinoza portrays Christ as someone “to whom the decrees of God which guide men to salvation were revealed not by words or visions but directly”.⁷³ Indeed, “if Moses spoke with God face to face as a man with his friend (that is, through the mediation of two bodies), Christ communicated with God from mind to mind”.⁷⁴ Therefore,

Christ was not so much a prophet as the mouth-piece of God. [...] Christ therefore understood revealed things truly and adequately. Hence if he sometimes prescribed them as laws, he did so because of the ignorance and obstinacy of the people.⁷⁵

In Spinoza’s view, the novelty of Christ consists only in his perfectly rational grasp of the natural divine law and in his effort to teach such a law on the basis of reason alone (at least, as much as possible). Spinoza emphasizes that:

Christ, as I said, was sent not to conserve a commonwealth and institute laws, but to teach the universal law alone. Hence, we readily understand that Christ did not abolish the Law of Moses at all, since he did not intend to introduce any new laws into the state. His overriding concern was to offer moral teaching, and to distinguish it from the laws of the state.⁷⁶

Scholars tend to read Spinoza as committed to presenting Christ as a “Preacher of pure Natural Religion” (to use Locke’s phrasing), or rather (to use Alexandre Matheron’s expression) “as a Spinozist philosopher”.⁷⁷ Yet, two important aspects of Spinoza’s position usually do not receive sufficient attention.

First, Spinoza has to maintain that there is just one consistent moral message taught by Holy Scripture. This claim is pivotal to Spinoza’s project of showing that the Bible contains true moral doctrines. The fact that Christ did not intend to abolish the law of Moses reinforces the idea that the “universal law” taught by Christ was in fact consistent with the prophetic law, or rather the core of natural divine law entailed by it. Christ’s teachings provide further support for the claim that there is a rational (or at least reasonable) ground in prophetic divine law, which Christ aims to uncover.⁷⁸

Second, by stressing the role of Christ as a mere preacher of universal law, Spinoza dismisses the *political* role of Christ. Distinct from the prophets who already played a crucial role in fostering or threatening the solidity of the Hebrew State, Christ and his Apostles were only private men, teaching as doctors and not aiming at establishing or undermining any political power. This implies that any political claim based upon Christ's authority has to be considered illegitimate. Spinoza's portrait of Christ aims at undermining the political vindications of seventeenth-century Christian sects (e.g., Calvinists) by showing that Christ never presented himself as a King or, like ancient prophets, as a political ruler, and thus Christianity has little to do with the authority and role of the political Sovereign.⁷⁹ Spinoza's own thesis, according to which only the political Sovereign possesses the right in matter of religion, receives further support from the example of Christ himself, who always respected the right of the established political authority.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, Spinoza's account of Christ raises two major problems. The first concerns Christian readers rather than Spinoza himself. The *Tractatus* leaves few doubts about the *necessity* of Christ's revelation. Although Christ represented an excellent and unique model of virtue, his function seems only that of *confirming* what everyone already knew from the Ancient Testament, that is, that Holy Scripture recommends the knowledge of God as our supreme good. On this basis, it would be hard to argue for any *necessity* of Christ's coming, and in fact establishing this necessity does not figure among Spinoza's main goals in the *Tractatus*. Moreover, insofar as Christ's message is reducible to the dictates of reasons, in principle every fully rational human being could grasp the same doctrines without necessarily relying on the intermediation of Christ.⁸¹

The second problem threatens Spinoza's own project insofar as Christ's example risks showing either too much or too little. As noticed in the previous section, Spinoza contends that natural reason alone is rarely able to reveal the true content of moral law and surely cannot produce any sufficient obligation for common people. Spinoza's account of how political obligation is established, and how passions should be used for this purpose, rests on this point.⁸² However, Christ might appear as "the Restorer and Preacher of pure Natural Religion", which seems to rule out any further needs for prophetic revelation and institutionalized religions.⁸³ Arguably, from Spinoza's own point of view, Christ would be only the exception that confirms the rule according to which natural reason alone is insufficient to bring common people towards beatitude. Yet, once it is admitted that Christ made natural divine law accessible to everyone, it might be possible to argue that *now* everyone could know the dictates of natural religion and just follow them, without any further need to affiliate with positive religions. Actually, Spinoza would reply that the same argument (i.e., the power of our passions) that reveals the weakness of reason to effectively grasp and motivate common people to act in accordance with natural divine law also explains why Christ's case must remain the sole exception. From Spinoza's portrait of Christ it does not follow that everyone could imitate him in freeing himself from the power of passions and attaining a pure rational knowledge of God and virtue. However, if this is the case, then it is no longer clear what the efficacy of Christ's teachings could be (if any), given the passionate nature of human beings and Spinoza's argument concerning the weakness of merely rational doctrines to produce a sufficiently strong motivation to act in accordance with moral law.

From Locke's point of view, the two abovementioned problems embedded in Spinoza's account of Christ constitute serious threats. Locke agrees with Spinoza in recognizing that the content of the law preached by Christ is consistent with the law of works contained in the Ancient Testament, and thus it entails the law of nature as well. However, by presenting Christ as a "Restorer and Preacher of pure Natural Religion", Spinoza's account suggests that Christ's coming was not strictly necessary. In fact, in Spinoza's view, the prophets already exercised

the role that Locke would like to attribute to Christ alone in both providing access to the content of the moral law and motivating human beings to act in accordance with it.⁸⁴

Spinoza and Locke agree on the fact that some non-rational means is necessary for (the majority of) human beings to grasp the content of the moral law and be motivated to act in accordance with it. Spinoza identifies this means with prophetic divine law while Locke identifies it with the law of faith established by Christ. Given Locke's portrait of Christ, Spinoza would agree that if we assume (as Locke does) that Christ acted like the prophets of the Ancient Testament, then in *this* sense his coming might have been necessary (as the preaching of any other prophet was). Yet, Spinoza would notice that Locke's account of Christ does not really save the necessity of Christ's coming as such, since it does not make Christ's role significantly different from that of any other prophets of the Ancient Testament. Against Locke, Spinoza would maintain that what makes Christ *exceptional* is the *way* in which he grasped the content of the law he taught, and only because he grasped it through reason alone he was also able to teach universally to all mankind, and not just to the Hebrew as other prophets did.

However, this line of thought would not convince Locke since it is ultimately inconsistent with the argument concerning the weaknesses of reason. Should Christ have taught by appealing to reason alone (as Spinoza contends), his preaching would have been ineffective. In fact, if reason alone does not have sufficient motivational force to bind common people (as both Spinoza and Locke warrant) it is hard to see how a purely rational preaching could have had any efficacy. Locke is thus ready to "normalize" the figure of Christ by presenting him in a way that perfectly fits Spinoza's portrait of a biblical prophet like Moses. In Locke's view the novelty and necessity of Christ's coming is sufficiently warranted by the new article of faith according to which "Jesus is the Messiah." The fact that the New Testament reveals that the belief in this article might compensate a lack of obedience to the law of works is sufficient to stress the difference between Christ and the prophets of the Ancient Testament. Consequently, Locke no longer needs to rely on Christ's exceptionally rational grasp of the law of nature to stress his novelty, and can simply emphasize the "reasonableness" of the content of Christ's teachings. Given the argument concerning both the epistemic and motivational weaknesses of reason, Locke's Christ is in fact in a much better position to successfully carry on his mission than Spinoza's Christ.

Scholars stressed how Spinoza's account of Christ, by insisting on the rationality of the message he taught, offers a bridge to lead common people from religious superstition to a purely philosophical grasp of the moral law. Carlos Fraenkel went even further by claiming that this view of Christ should apply to Biblical prophets as well. According to Fraenkel, Spinoza himself was in fact ultimately committed to "dogmatism".⁸⁵ On the contrary, reading Spinoza's argument from the point of view of his discussion of the weaknesses of reason leads to appreciating how Christ's role is rather that of confirming the overall *reasonableness* of the message taught by Holy Scripture. Yet, Spinoza's effort to dismiss any political vindication in Christ's preaching and to reduce his role to that of a universal preacher also generates tensions with Spinoza's overall discussion of the weaknesses of reason. This is why Locke, in order to pursue the discussion about the weaknesses of reason, considers it more appropriate to normalize the figure of Christ and reduce him to the profile of a Biblical prophet like Moses.

To conclude, the comparison between Locke and Spinoza's arguments reveals that they use similar argumentative strategies in order to underscore the weaknesses of reason in both knowing and motivating human beings to act in accordance with natural law. The main difference among their views concerns the role of Christ, who Spinoza presents as concerned mainly with the teaching of "universal religion", while Locke portrays him as a king commanding a law under the promise of eternal rewards and the threat of eternal punishments.⁸⁶ If we accept (as both Spinoza and Locke do) that reason alone is mostly unable to provide access to moral law and motivate

human beings to act in accordance with it, then should Christ have preached by appealing to reason alone, his mission would have been a failure. Locke's different account of Christ confirms that no exception should be admitted to the general point already defended by Spinoza concerning the epistemic and motivational weakness of human reason. From this point of view, even the main point of disagreement between Locke and Spinoza reveals how they were both committed to underline the weaknesses of reason.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Han Thomas Adriaenssen, Eddo Evink, Sarah Hutton, Martin Lenz, Lodi Nauta, Emily Thomas, Detlev Pätzold and Willem Verhoeven for their helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

Notes

1. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 15, sec. 1, 186. Supporters of the dogmatist position would have been Maimonides and Spinoza's own intimate friend Lodewijk Meyer, author of the *Philosophia Sacrae Scripturae Interpres* (1666). The other position opposed by Spinoza is scepticism, according to which "reason should be the servant of Scripture" (Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 15, sec. 1, 186). According to Spinoza, supporters of the sceptic position would have been some Hebrews who tried to react against Maimonides, as Rabbi Jeuda Al-Fakhar, or more modern Calvinists. On this point, see Lagrée, *Spinoza et le débat religieux*, 64–77, who also points out that the distinction between sceptics and dogmatics can be traced back to the classic doxography of Sextus Empiricus. For a historical discussion of Spinoza's polemical targets in the *Tractatus*, see also Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*; Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise*; Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*; James, *Spinoza on Philosophy*, 215–28.
2. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 7, sec. 20, 113.
3. See Colie, "Spinoza in England"; Marshall, *Resistance, Religion and Responsibility*, 454; Hefelbower, *The Relation of John Locke to English Deism*.
4. Locke makes explicit that his main polemical target was "deism" in the *Second Vindication* (published in 1697). In his introduction to the Clarendon Edition of Locke's *Reasonableness*, John Higgins-Biddle argues that Locke arguably had in mind Uriel Da Costa's *Exemplar Humanae Vitae* (written in 1639 but published only in 1687 by Limbroch) and Toland's *Christianity non Mysteriosus* (1696). Concerning the historical context of Locke's *Reasonableness* and the debate on deism, see Byrne, *Natural Religion*, 52–110; Lurbe, "La 'Reasonableness' du christianisme." Concerning Toland's complex involvement with deism, see Sullivan, *John Toland*. The association of Spinoza with English deism has been studied since the seminal essays by Colie, "Spinoza and the English Deists" and "Spinoza in England." Yet, the seventeenth-century English context is particularly rich and complex, and the term "deism" is not always informative about the different positions grouped under this label. For a detailed reconstruction of this historical background, see Hutton, *British Philosophy*.
5. Jarig Jelles, Spinoza's intimate friend and the author of the *Preface* to the *Opera Posthuma*, was among the first to advance a deist interpretation of Spinoza's works by claiming that they can provide a valuable guide to discover the hidden rationality at the base of Christian religion. See, e.g., Jelles, *Preface*, §27 (in Akkerman and Hubbeling, "The Preface"). A deist reading of Spinoza's philosophy is still at the root of today's interpretations of the influence of Spinoza on "radical Enlightenment" (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*).
6. See, e.g., Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*; James, *Spinoza on Philosophy*.
7. Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*, uses this expression to refer to Locke's position.
8. Concerning Spinoza association with Enlightenment, see, e.g., Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* and concerning Locke relationship with Enlightenment, see Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*.
9. Hoffheimer, "Locke, Spinoza and Political Equality" provides all the fundamental historical and conceptual elements to build the case that Spinoza might have been a likely source of Locke's egalitarianism. Brown, "Locke as Secret 'Spinozist'", reconstructs the historical context of William Carroll's charge of Spinozism addressed against Locke's *Essay*. Gorham, "Spinoza, Locke and the Limits of Toleration" compares Locke and Spinoza on the issue of political equality and toleration. Klever, "Slocke

- Alias Locke”; and especially “Locke’s Disguised Spinozism” (available at <https://huenemanniac.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/lockes-disguised-spinozism.pdf>) provides the most extensive and detailed examination of the many passages that appear throughout Locke’s works that seem reminiscent of Spinoza.
10. This statement is taken from Locke’s third reply to the Bishop of Worcester (1698) and is quoted by Higgins-Biddle in his introduction to Locke’s *Reasonableness*, xxix, in order to exclude that Spinoza was among Locke’s targets in the *Reasonableness*.
 11. This reference (Bodleian Library, LL 309) is provided by Klever “Locke’s Disguised Spinozism,” 12.
 12. Locke, *Essay*, IV.12.8, 643. Cf. IV.3.18, 549; IV.4.7, 565; I.3.1, 66.
 13. Kato, “The *Reasonableness* in Historical Light”, stresses the irreconcilability between *Essay* and the *Reasonableness*. On the contrary, Israelsen argues that according to Locke’s *Reasonableness* revelation would not be “necessary, over and above reason in acquiring moral understanding”. See Israelsen, “God, Mixed Modes and Natural Law,” 1117. According to Israelsen, Locke would claim that it is because of the force of passions, rather than due to the weaknesses of reason, that ordinary human beings mostly fail to acquire a rational grasp of morality. In this way, Israelsen tries to demonstrate a complete consistency between *Essay* and the *Reasonableness*. Yet, I do not see how claiming that passions are strong enough to overpower reason (as Israelsen assumes) is actually different from claiming that reason is too weak to resist the determination of the passions and pursue the search for true moral laws.
 14. In general, I maintain that Locke’s main claims in the *Reasonableness* do not contradict the chief points upheld in the *Essay*, see footnotes 30, 31, 33, 39, 43.
 15. The reading I am advancing follows the growing interest in the scholarship for the evolution of Spinoza’s thought from the early writings to the *Ethics* (see, e.g., Sangiacomo, *L’essenza del corpo*; Melamed, *The Young Spinoza*). Concerning how Spinoza’s attitude towards the powers of reason moved from the optimism of the early writings to a more pessimist view in the *Ethics*, see Sangiacomo, “Before the Conatus Doctrine.”
 16. A valuable historical account of the formation of Locke’s religious thought across his works and in a historical context is offered by Pearson “The Religion of Locke”; Sina, “Il pensiero filosofico”; Marshall, *Locke: Resistance, Religion, Responsibility*, 384–451.
 17. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 1, 5.
 18. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 3, 17.
 19. In his discussion, Locke uses different expressions to indicate the “law of nature” by calling it sometimes “Morality”, “Law of Mankind” and other similar expressions. In my discussion, I will use mainly the expression “law of nature”, and I will follow Locke in considering the other expressions as synonyms.
 20. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 3, 18.
 21. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 3, 19.
 22. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 3, 21.
 23. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 3, 22.
 24. Concerning the establishment of this claim and its hermeneutical and theological consequences, see Russo, *Ragione e Ascolto*; Camera, “Cristianesimo messianico ed ermeneutica.”
 25. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 149.
 26. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 143, emphasis added.
 27. Concerning Locke’s denial that human reason was corrupted by Adam’s fall, see Marshall, *Locke: Resistance, Religion, Responsibility*, 414–18.
 28. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 139.
 29. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 157–8.
 30. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 155. Locke’s claim in the *Reasonableness* that the law of nature is hardly discovered by unassisted reason squares with his denial that moral principles are innate, and thus with his commitment to think of them as the result of a process of deduction based on experience, which might be extremely difficult to carry on. Concerning the consistency between the doctrine of the *Essay* and the *Reasonableness*, see Colman, *Locke’s Moral Philosophy*, 138–40; Byrne, *Natural Religion*, 37–51.
 31. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 149. It should be stressed that Locke’s discussion here concerns mainly the “Gentile World”, namely, human beings unassisted by revelation and relying on natural reason alone. Locke explicitly acknowledges that natural law was revealed to Moses and to the Ancient Hebrews (Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 145–6). In the *Essay*, Locke is thoroughly committed to the claim that only by assessing the “Conformity, or Disagreement, Men’s voluntary

- Actions have to a Rule, the morality of these actions may be determined" (Locke, *Essay* II.28.4, 351). He further specifies that "[t]he only true touchstone of *moral Rectitude* is then the natural law decreed by our Creator" (Locke, *Essay*, II.28.8, 352). On this point, see Forde, "Mixed Modes." What the *Reasonableness* emphasises with regard to the *Essay* are the difficulties of knowing divine law through unassisted reason alone.
32. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 152.
 33. The argument here remains historical and leaves open the possibility to claim that human beings could fruitfully use Locke's *Essay* to elaborate a system of morals. Yet, this could happen only *after* Christ revealed what the fundamental laws of morality are. In this sense, even a "Lockean" moral philosophy based on natural reason would not discover the moral law for the first time, but rather confirm a posteriori the reasonableness of the moral law already revealed by Christ. It has been argued that, after the *Essay*, Locke became more pessimistic about the ability of reason to devise a system of morality, as it results from Locke's reply of 30 March 1696 to Molyneux. See on this point, Woltersdorff, *Locke's Ethics of Belief*, 141–2; Colman, *Locke's Moral Philosophy*, 138.
 34. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 157–8.
 35. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 153.
 36. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 158.
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. Commentators usually agree in seeing Locke as committed to a hedonistic account of human motivation in the *Essay*, according to which the enforcement of a law presupposes the capacity of the law-giver to excite desire of rewards and fear of punishments (cf. e.g., Locke, *Essay*, II.20.15, 232; II.28.5, 351; II.28.8, 352). See Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy"; Wilson, "The Moral Epistemology"; Colman, *Locke's Moral Philosophy*, 235–7; Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, vol. 2, 184–95. Concerning the compatibility between this hedonist picture and moral motivation based on rationality, see Darwall, *The British Moralists*, 36–42 and 149–62; Israelsen, "God, Mixed Modes and Natural Law."
 40. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 161.
 41. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 162.
 42. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 163.
 43. Seemingly, the same role is attributed to reason also in the *Essay*. See Helm, "Locke on Faith and Knowledge"; Snyder, "Faith and Reason in Locke's *Essay*"; Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," 192; Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy," 217–19; Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought*, 169–93; Jolley, "Locke on Faith and Reason." Concerning the notion of "reasonableness" and its evolution across Locke's works, see Goyard-Fabre, *Locke et la raison raisonnable*.
 44. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 4, sec. 4, 59; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 186. In quoting Spinoza, I use the English translation provided by Silverthorne and Israel (Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*). After the standard reference to the chapter and section of the Spinoza, *Tractatus*, I add the reference to the page number of the critical edition of the Latin text edited by Fokke Akkerman (Spinoza, *Oeuvres*, vol. 3).
 45. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 4, sec. 6, 61; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 191.
 46. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 4, sec. 8–9, 62; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 193–5. In Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 28 Spinoza demonstrates that the knowledge of God is the mind's Supreme Good, and in *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 37, scholium 1 he relates "religion" to desires and actions based on the knowledge of God.
 47. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 4, sec. 12, 65; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 201.
 48. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 4, sec. 5, 60; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 188. For a similar view, see Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 37, scholium 2.
 49. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 14, sec. 3, 179; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 468.
 50. Cf. e.g., Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 35, corollary 1.
 51. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 7, sec. 4, 99; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 280.
 52. This point is well emphasised by James, "Creating Rational Understanding" and *Spinoza on Philosophy*, 105–10.
 53. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 3, 18.
 54. For this use of the passions in the *Tractatus*, see Sangiacomo, "Spinoza and Relational Autonomy."
 55. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 157–8.
 56. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 5, sec. 14, 76; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 226–8. Even in the *Ethics* Spinoza sometimes hints at the fact that the geometrical order of his demonstration may prevent the reader from fully grasping his views. See, e.g., Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 18, scholium.
 57. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 2, sec. 13, 35; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 127.

58. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 1, sec. 26, 25; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 106.
59. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 15, sec. 10, 194; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 502; emphasis added). In the *Ethics*, Spinoza demonstrates that human beings are necessarily and always subject to passions (Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4 propositions 3–4) and passions are the main obstacle to act under the guidance of reason (Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4 proposition 14–18; *Ethics*, 4 propositions 34–5).
60. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 14, 158.
61. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 15, sec. 10, 194; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 502.
62. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 5, sec. 8, 72; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 220.
63. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 4, sec. 5, 60; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 189.
64. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 16, sec. 7, 199; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 514.
65. On this line, see, for instance, Kaplan, “Le salut par l’obéissance”; Touati, “Croyances vrais et croyances nécessaires”; Brown, “Philosophy and Prophecy”; Dominguez, “La Religion chez Spinoza”; Elazar, “Spinoza and the Bible”; Halper, “Spinoza and Freedom of Religion”; James, “Creating Rational Understanding” and *Spinoza on Philosophy*; Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*.
66. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 16, sec. 3, 196; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 506.
67. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 16, sec. 7, 199; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 514.
68. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 5, sec. 9, 73; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 220.
69. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 5, sec. 10, 74; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 222.
70. This point is developed further in Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 4, propositions 14–15, *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 37 scholium 2 and in Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, cap. 2.
71. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 14, sec. 8, 181; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 473.
72. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 14, sec. 10, 183; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 476.
73. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 1, sec. 18, 19; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 92.
74. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 1, sec. 19, 19; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 92.
75. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 4, sec. 10, 64; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 196.
76. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 5, sec. 3, 70; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, 212. See also Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 7, 7, and cap. 8, 11.
77. See Matheron, *Le Christ et le Salut*, 138. Also Zac, *Spinoza et l’interprétation*; Laux, *Imagination et Religion*, concur on this point. For an overview of the debate on Spinoza’s account of Christ, see Mauro, “La cristologia di Spinoza”, who also stresses that the major difference between Christ and any other philosopher is that Christ seems to have immediate access to the knowledge of moral truth, while for philosophers this is the result of a process.
78. Cohen, *Spinoza on State and Religion*, vehemently attacks Spinoza for having ignored the universal nature of the Ancient Hebrew law. However, Spinoza’s discussion of universal moral laws is intended to show that *both* the Old and the New Testaments are concerned with it. In fact, Spinoza’s account of Christ shows that the New Testament is not “new” regarding its content.
79. Bove, “Les raisons de l’échec”, distinguishes between the universality of Christ’s teachings and the predication of the Apostles (especially Paul), who contributed to turn Christianity in a new form of religious superstition shaped by the desire for power and political ambition.
80. Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 19.
81. Matheron, *Le Christ et le Salut*, offers a highly speculative account of the necessity of Christ’s coming by arguing that Christ would aim to show the possibility of further reappearances of the same individuals in different times (actually, the possibility of reincarnation), which is consistent with Spinoza’s ontology but not fully demonstrable.
82. It should be noted that this claim is reproduced also in the *Ethics* (see, e.g., Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4 proposition 37 scholium 1–2).
83. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 1, 5.
84. For instance, in Spinoza, *Tractatus*, cap. 7, sec. 7, Spinoza interprets Christ’s command of “turning the other cheek” as a restatement of a maxim already introduced by Jeremiah in an analogous socio-political circumstance.
85. See Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, 254–81.
86. Locke, *Reasonableness*, cap. 12, 122.

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